

Andrew Jackson to House of Representatives, January 26, 1837, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

TO HENRY A. WISE.¹

1 Copy, made by Andrew Jackson, jr., who certifies that "this is a true copy from the original sent". It is addressed "To the Hon'ble Henry A. Wise, chairman of the investigating committee of the abuses and corruptions charged against the Executive Departments". Following this copy in the Jackson MSS. is a draft of the letter, of the same date, in Jackson's handwriting.

Washington, January 26, 1837.

Sir, I received late on the evening of the 24th inst., your letter covering a copy of certain resolutions purporting to have been adopted by a committee of the House of Representatives, of which you are chairman, and request that you will lay before that committee this my reply which I hasten to make.²

2 Dec. 13, 1836, Wise, of Virginia, introduced resolutions into the House to refer to a select committee that part of Jackson's annual message which asserted that the departments of state were ably managed, and that the committee be directed to make a full examination of the conditions in the said departments, present and past. He followed it with a bitter speech, adorned with Wise's customary exaggeration and partizanship. The investigation that followed took an angry turn. Along with it ran another, on the deposit banks. R. M. Whitney, who was associated with these banks in such a way as to make himself very objectionable to the friends of the Bank of the United States, was called before the second committee and badgered most severely by Wise and Bailey Peyton.

Library of Congress

They believed him dishonest and seemed to think he had no rights as a witness. When he was summoned before the committee on departments he refused to attend. He was then haled before the House and for a week faced a severe examination. At last he was dismissed without specific punishment. See *Niles' Register*, LI. 354, 397, 398, 399, 400, 401, 415. See also *Congressional Debates*, vol. XIII., pt. 2, pp. 1578, 1861, 1865, 1871, 2076; *cf. ibid.*, pp. 1057, 1170, 1399, 1572, 2143.

It appears by the published proceedings of the House of Representatives, that the committee of which you are chairman was appointed on your motion. The resolution offered by you and finally adopted by the House raised a direct issue with that part of my annual message in which I held the following language; "Before concluding this paper, I think it due to the various Executive Departments to bear testimony of their prosperous condition and to the ability and integrity with which they have been conducted It has been my aim to enforce in all of them a vigilant and faithful discharge of the public business; and it is gratifying to me to believe that there is no just cause of complaint from any quarter, at the manner in which they have fulfilled the object of their creation." Your resolution is in the following words. "Resolved, That so much of the Presidents message as relates to the 'condition of the various Executive Departments, the ability and integrity with which they have been conducted, the vigilant and faithful discharge of the public business in all of them, and the causes of complaint, from any quarter, at the manner in which they have fulfilled the objects of their creation,' be referred to a select committee, to consist of nine members, with power to send for persons and papers, and with instructions to inquire into the condition of the various Executive Departments, the ability and integrity with which they have been conducted, into the manner in which the public business has been discharged in all of them, and into all causes of complaint, from any quarter, at the manner in which said departments, or their bureaus or offices, or any of their officers or agents of every description whatever, directly or indirectly connected with them in any manner, officially or unofficially, in duties pertaining to the public interest, have fulfilled or failed to accomplish the objects of their creation, or have violated their duties or have injured and impaired the

Library of Congress

public service and interest, and that said Committee, in its inquiries, may refer to such periods of time as to them may seem expedient and proper.”

It also appears from the published proceedings of the House, that this resolution was accompanied and supported by a speech of considerable length, in which you preferred many severe but vague charges of corruption and abuse in the Executive Departments. The resolutions adopted by the Committee, as well as that adopted by the House itself, must be taken in connexion with your introductory speech which gives a character to the whole proceeding. When thus regarded, it is obvious, that by the resolution of the House an issue is made with the President of the united states, as he had alleged, in his annual message that the Heads of the Executive Departments had performed their official duties with ability and integrity. In your speech you denied this; you charged them with manifold corruptions, and abuses of trust as you had done in former speeches to which you referred; and you demanded an investigation through the medium of a Committee. Certain other members of Congress, as appears by the published debates, united with you in these accusations; and for the purpose of ascertaining their truth or falsehood, the Committee you demanded was ordered to be raised, and you were placed at its head. The first proceeding of the investigating Committee is to pass a series of resolutions, which though amended in their passage, were as understood, introduced by you, calling on the President and the Heads of the Departments, not to answer to any specific charge; not to explain any alleged abuse; not to give information as to any particular transaction; but assuming that they have been guilty of the charges alleged, calls upon them to furnish evidence against themselves!

After the reiterated charges you have made, it was to have been expected, that you would have been prepared to reduce them to specifications; and that the Committee would then proceed to investigate the matters alleged. But instead of this, you resort to generalities even more vague than your original accusations, and in open violation of the constitution and of that well established and wise maxim “that all men are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty, according to the established rules of Law,” you request myself and

Library of Congress

the Heads of the Departments to become our own accusers, and to furnish the evidence to convict ourselves. And this call purports to be founded on the authority of that body, in which alone by the constitution the power of impeaching us is vested! The Heads of Departments may answer such a request as they please, provided they do not withdraw their own time and that of the officers under their direction from the public business, to the injury thereof. To that business, I shall direct them to devote themselves, in preference to any illegal and unconstitutional calls for information, no matter from what source it may come, or however anxious they may be to meet it. For myself, I shall repel all such attempts as an invasion of the principles of justice, as well as of the constitution; and I shall esteem it my sacred duty to the people of the united states, to resist them as I would the establishment of a spanish inquisition.

If after all the severe accusations contained in the various speeches of yourself and your associates, you are unwilling of your own accord to bring specific charges, then I request your Committee to call on yourself and your associates and every other member of Congress who has made the general charge of corruption, to testify before God and our Country whether you or they know of any specific corruption or abuse of trust in the Executive Departments; and if so what it is. If you are able to point to any case where there is the slightest reason to suspect corruption or abuse of trust, no obstacle which I can remove, shall be interposed to prevent the fullest scrutiny by all legal means. The offices of all the Departments will be opened to you, and every proper facility furnished for this purpose.

I hope sir, we shall at last have your charges, and that you will proceed to investigate them, not like an inquisitor but in the accustomed mode. If you either will not make specific accusations, or if when made, you attempt to establish them by making freemen their own accusers, you will not expect me to countenance your proceedings. In the short period which remains of my official duty, I shall endeavour, as I have heretofore endeavoured, to fulfill the obligations of that oath of office, by which I engaged, "to the best of my ability, to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the united states;" and for this and

Library of Congress

other reasons of the most solemn character, I shall, on the one hand, cause every possible facility consistent with Law and justice, to be given to the investigation of specific, tangible charges, and on the other, shall repudiate all attempts to invade the just rights of the Executive Departments and of the individuals composing the same. If after all your clamor, you will make no specific charges, or bring no proof of such as shall be made, you and your associates must be regarded by the good people of the united states as the authors of unfounded calumnies; and the public servants whom you have assailed, will in the estimation of all honorable men, stand fully acquitted.

In the mean time I cannot but express my astonishment, that members of Congress should call for information as to the names of persons to whom contingent moneys are paid, and the objects of those payments, when there are six standing Committees under the seventy seventh rule of the House of Representatives, whose special duties are, to examine annually into all the details of those expenditures in each of the Executive Departments. The like remark is applicable to some other branches of the information sought by you, ample details in respect to which are to be found in the reports laid before Congress and now on your files, and to which I recommend you to have recourse.

I am respectfully etc.